

Ronald Reagan and the President's Daily Brief

Richard J. Kerr and Peter Dixon Davis

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The presidential election of 1980 was over, and it was the morning after. In CIA's Office of Current Operations, we knew that a new boss and a new set of customers had us in their sights. Ronald Reagan would be in the White House by the end of January, and a Republican team of national security officials would be calling the shots. CIA would have a new Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). He would bring in a new deputy. There probably would be other new faces at the top of CIA, and a new set of staff weenies would appear as well.

Déjà vu all over again? So it seemed to us: here we were, the Director and Deputy Director of the Office of Current Intelligence, and we faced another new administration, another foreign policy team, another group to which we had to prove ourselves all over again. But, while we were veterans of such transitions, neither of us had grown so jaded or so weary of trying to convince our customers of the value of intelligence that we did not warm to the possibility of new experiences. We were at once stimulated by the prospect of change and challenged by the problems we clearly had to overcome. It would not be easy, but it would be exciting. The task sounded straightforward if you had no experience trying to do it: providing a daily report of current intelligence to the President and his national security team that was comprehensive, offered information and analysis not available from other sources, and helped rather than frustrated the policymaking process.

We knew that in the confusion of changing administrations, establishing daily intelligence support at top levels of a wary new leadership might just as likely be resisted as welcomed. At the same time, this new group valued intelligence; the question was whether they thought CIA was up to the task. How would we be received by a palace guard that at times had appeared downright hostile?

It was not as though we had not been warned. The campaign just ended had been a rough one, with CIA taking its knocks, and intelligence performance generally getting poor marks from a range of Republican critics of the Carter administration's handling of our business. Our track record with presidents, moreover, was not encouraging. We had spent the past few years trying to divine exactly what President Carter wanted in the way of current support—the feedback was as mixed as it was sparse—and we were never sure our efforts were on the mark. He eventually took time to visit Headquarters and thank us specifically for the President's Daily Brief (PDB), but we were not convinced that he really valued it.

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Ronald Reagan gave us pause. The nature of his views and his lack of experience in dealing with foreign policy issues left us even less certain what kind of support would interest him (or what he would accept). We could not have imagined then that soon we would be having daily one-on-one access to “the highest level.”

First we would have to contend with Reagan's foreign policy advisers, whose words and actions during the campaign likewise inspired little confidence in the CIA's future. William Casey, Richard Allen, Fred Ikle, Frank Gaffney, Michael Pillsbury, and Angelo Codevilla all were strong critics of intelligence performance.

Establishing Contact With the Transition Team

President Carter made the first move. He directed that the PDB be made available immediately to the President-elect and Vice President-elect so that they would be getting the same information as those responsible for national security until the inauguration.

The first contact with the new team was made in a telephone call from Richard Lehman, who had been the Director of the Office of Current Intelligence during previous transitions, to Richard Allen. The following day, Kerr accompanied Lehman to the transition headquarters in Washington. The meeting was brief and businesslike and clearly placed Allen as our point of contact. It also was clear that he wanted no regular contact with DCI Turner or anyone else in the current leadership: he preferred, as the President-elect's designee, that we serve him directly

and that he be the channel for any required intelligence support. To our knowledge, he did not have any regular contact with others in CIA during the transition period.

From that first day, we were pretty much on our own in setting up all subsequent briefing sessions with the three incoming occupants of the White House and in arranging for their intelligence support.

The Briefings Begin

The process began almost immediately with a series of briefings of Allen held in his Washington business office, in cars, and at the Madison Hotel over breakfast. He was shown the PDB and other current reports on the full range of intelligence issues. We also provided special memorandums in response to his various requests. Allen was an avid customer almost from the first day. There was never any question about his view of our loyalty; we worked for him and the new administration. It was an interesting situation: we were still producing the PDB for President Carter, although we had no contact with him or with senior officials in the administration. The incoming group had captured all our attention, and there were still nearly three months to go before the inauguration.

The briefings entered a new phase when the President-elect and the Vice President-elect made their first visit to Washington in mid-November. During their week in town, Allen set up a couple of meetings with President-elect Reagan at his Blair House quarters. At the same time, we began daily briefings of Vice President-elect Bush, who was staying around the corner at the Jackson Place townhouse reserved for former presidents. The sessions with Reagan had to compete with the extraordinary press of business awaiting the new chief executive; they were tightly structured, and intelligence issues were not central. Allen used the meetings to conduct a good deal of general business. The sessions with Bush were quite different: as a former DCI with whom we had had some previous contact, he was a customer of a different sort. His briefings were informal, animated, and extended well beyond the substance of the PDB. Arrangements were handled directly, facilitated by the fact that Bush's executive assistant was also a former colleague.

At the end of that week, as Reagan and Bush prepared to return to Los Angeles and Houston, respectively, things took an interesting turn. Influenced by his experience as DCI and UN Ambassador and his familiarity with intelligence processes and people, Bush had ruminated on several occasions about the need to bring Reagan into the current analytic stream as quickly as possible. He felt it was imperative that the newly elected president receive daily briefings based on the PDB, and—even more important—that a professional intelligence officer be present to answer any questions, provide background information, and follow up on whatever intelligence needs

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Reagan might have. Bush knew from firsthand experience that filtering went on as an intelligence product moved through the White House staff and on to the President. He also knew that to make intelligence relevant the Agency needed regular feedback from its key customers.

It seemed a good opportunity, given Bush's candor and friendly disposition toward the Agency, to make a bold recommendation: because he was scheduled in a few hours to ride along with Reagan to Andrews Air Force Base, perhaps he might want to urge his new boss to request that such daily briefings be provided him personally during the period he remained in California pending the inauguration. Bush told Davis he would give it a try.

Shortly after Reagan's takeoff that afternoon, a message from the plane arrived at CIA Headquarters. Ed Meese asked that a CIA briefer be prepared to present the PDB to the President-elect at his home in Pacific Palisades the following morning. A few hours later, after hurriedly arranging for daily transmission of the PDB to an Agency facility in Los Angeles, Kerr was on a plane to the West Coast.

Opening a Second Front

Now we were operating on both coasts. We used an Agency facility that had secure communications, and Kerr set up business in a vault. The time difference helped because there was an opportunity for Kerr to read the PDB and then call on a secure line to ask questions and get additional information. Davis directed the production process in

Washington—selecting items for the book, sharpening the judgments, and getting the supporting information that was needed to understand complicated issues that might end up being treated in a paragraph in the PDB.

Although we were the front men in this drama, it was an Agency-wide effort. Obviously, the country and technical analysts in the Directorate of Intelligence provided the daily product and responded to the wide range of questions. Photo interpreters, technical experts in the Directorate of Science and Technology, Foreign Broadcast Information Service specialists, and the clandestine collectors in the Directorate of Operations provided the grist for this effort. Without a high-quality product and an organization that could respond quickly to questions and crises, this briefing process would not have gotten off the ground.

The team that put together the PDB every afternoon and evening was extraordinary. Jim McCullough, Chuck Peters, Gail Solin, and Ray McGovern comprised a group of sophisticated analysts with a keen sense of the issues that the customers would or should be interested in. All were to become briefers when the number of our customers expanded after inauguration.

Into the Lion's Den

Kerr had no idea of what to expect at Reagan's house in Pacific Palisades. A cast of thousands, Secret Service a mile deep, and a palace of a residence? No, nothing of the kind. The CIA security officer supporting Kerr had located the house the previous day. Driving up the narrow road to the residence, the only sign of something unusual was that the driveway was closed off. A modest house, looking a bit rundown, was the first impression. A Secret Service agent approached, and Kerr showed him a CIA identification card, saying he was there to brief the President-elect. No passes, no search, no questions, and no horseholders. He went into the recreation room on the lower floor and told a young woman in the makeshift office space that he was there for the intelligence briefing. A man introduced himself as responsible for security and escorted him to the main floor. He suggested that he probably should sit in on the briefing; when told it was for Reagan only, he just nodded and went to find him. A minute later, the future President came out in his bathrobe. We went into the breakfast area, and he introduced Mrs. Reagan. A dog sat next to the table. It was very casual and domestic. Reagan offered coffee, and we went into the den. He read the PDB carefully, asking an occasional question, and then read the other material. We talked briefly about the briefing process and what type of material he would like to see. He agreed that, unless there was some pressing engagement, an early morning briefing would work best.

With no further ado, the pattern was set. During the remainder of the transition, each week we rotated the briefing and editorial duties on the

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west and east coasts. The briefing sessions in California continued every morning much as they had that first day, Davis being received with equally little fuss by an attentive and gracious Mr. Reagan and a watchful but friendly Mrs. Reagan.

Reagan as Customer

During the holiday period, the President-elect was as diligent as ever in keeping up his briefing schedule, breaking off only for Christmas and for a quick trip to Palm Springs for the traditional New Year's Eve party at the Walter Annenbergs. Returning the next day, he even agreed to meet Davis in the late afternoon for a catchup session. One lesson learned that day: Reagan was a “morning person,” not an “afternoon person.”

As a rule, Reagan was a studious reader, going over each item deliberately and with considerable concentration. It was common knowledge that he had pretty fixed views on such subjects as the Soviet Union, European diplomacy, and Israel, but—somewhat to our surprise—he showed no impatience or disdain with analysis that presented a different view. In contrast to Allen, for example, there was little tendency to challenge or dispute our line of thinking. If he was skeptical, he rarely showed it. Rather, the door seemed to be open to new ideas, even if they were not welcome or necessarily accepted. And, despite the serious approach to the material, there were more than a few flashes of the Reagan humor. He was, in short, an interested, cordial, and somewhat baffling customer.

Because of Reagan's willingness and patience in reading items we called to his attention, we were frank about the product. We were careful to point out articles that were light on facts as well as those where the analysis was superficial or a bit naïve. It was not uncommon for us to comment on a particular piece that “we really do not know much about this particular development.”

The daily routine was interrupted only for a second visit to Washington in mid-January, when we returned to the earlier pattern of briefing Allen, Reagan, and Bush at their Pennsylvania Avenue quarters. On Reagan's return to California, Davis accompanied the presidential party on what was deemed an inappropriately humble military aircraft—a DC-9. Midway in the flight, he was invited to join Reagan in the forward cabin to review the day's PDB and to go over a special memorandum on factional splits in the Palestinian leadership. This turned into a more extended session than usual, giving the President-elect an opportunity to raise a number of questions on issues of priority interest to him.

Iran and the hostage situation were uppermost in our minds throughout the transition. Reagan's concern for the Embassy hostages was acute, and he absorbed whatever raw and finished intelligence we were able to offer on the subject.

Briefers on the Inside

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the briefing process was the relationship that developed between both of us, on the one hand, and those we briefed. Often during briefings, or while we waited during telephone calls or other visitations, we overheard conversations between Reagan or Bush and potential cabinet members or advisers. We listened to discussions of their strengths and weaknesses, complaints and personal exchanges that clearly were not meant for outsiders' ears. We also watched the courting process and the beginning of what would become the pecking order for those around the President. We were accepted as part of the scenery—trusted without any apparent reservations. They seemed in fact to trust us with sensitive personal information in the same way we trusted them with the most sensitive intelligence.

Equally striking was the degree to which we were given a free hand during this two-month period of direct contact with a top leadership that would eventually include Secretary of Defense-designate Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State-designate Alexander Haig as well as Reagan, Bush, and Allen. We had little supervision from officials within the CIA or the Carter administration.

Another interesting feature of this period was that, to our knowledge, Reagan, Bush, and Allen did not receive formal, regular briefings from any other part of the government. There were contacts with State and Defense, but nothing like the type of regular contact we had established. The lack of contact between us and William Casey, who was to become DCI, was also noteworthy. At most,

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Kerr would exchange “good morning” greetings with Bill Casey, to whom he had been introduced by Reagan. Casey usually was with a group of senior advisers waiting for the intelligence briefing to end outside Reagan’s den. He clearly was not worried about what we were saying. Similarly, DCI Turner never asked us what was going on.

Direction From CIA Leadership

After the initial contact with Richard Lehman, we were largely on our own. We reported back to Bruce C. Clarke, Jr., the Deputy Director of Intelligence (DDI)—our immediate boss—and kept him informed about what we were doing and what questions were being asked. We directed most of the tasking for papers or information that we got from the principals or from Allen to the appropriate offices in CIA, and we kept CIA leaders informed of our activity by a daily memorandum. One thing we decided early on was that we were not going to report on the conversations we participated in or overheard, or the personal reactions or comments of those we were briefing, unless it directly related to intelligence support. Consequently, we kept our daily reports clear of any gossip or personal information. That turned out to be a wise decision.

Neither of us received any clear instructions about these briefings of the prospective President, Vice President, National Security Adviser, and others we would be involved with, other than “not to screw it up.” Bruce Clarke’s most explicit instruction to Kerr before the first briefing was “get a black belt to go with that blue suit—the brown one is not appropriate.” He bought a black

belt. Davis did not need such basic instruction. He still had the proper black attache case he had used at the Vietnam peace talks in Paris doing daily duty with Ambassadors Harri-man, Vance, and Lodge. The confidence that Bruce Clarke had in us was not unexpected. He had been Kerr’s mentor for nearly 20 years and was an extraordinary intelligence officer; some of his instruction had stuck.

Putting It All Together

We are convinced that this two-month period of private briefings gave the new administration a degree of confidence in the ability and loyalty of CIA that would not have been possible if the initial contact had been limited to those few more formal briefings mentioned by former DDI John Helgerson in his 1996 book, *CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates*. Our worst fears about the more extreme critics tearing CIA apart when the new administration came in proved groundless. Some of the credit goes to this briefing effort. Bush’s success in convincing Reagan that regular briefings were important and Reagan’s instructions that the

Secretaries of State and Defense receive the PDB were key. Finally, it was clear that Bill Casey was going to shape CIA along his own lines, not on the basis of transition team recommendations.

Looking back on the transition experience, it seems hard to believe that things fell into place so simply and with so little bureaucratic folderol and that the process had such lasting results. The system that evolved was as unprecedented as it was unpredictable. A review of the more striking short- and long-term features may be useful:

- There was no previous model, or rules of procedures, to guide us in meeting needs and exploiting opportunities as they arose.
- The system was planned only in the sense that we knew how we could help incoming officials, if only they would let us, and we had some sense of how they could help us.
- The support was geared to respond quickly to whatever we felt the situation called for.
- The day-to-day personal contact enabled us, in ad hoc fashion, to tailor the support.
- Requirements were not filtered; they were received directly, continually, and from the top level.
- There was virtually no intervention by intelligence overseers representing either the incoming or outgoing administrations.
- The transition team of incoming intelligence advisers installed at the Agency was out of the loop, having

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no contact with us and possibly not being aware of the support we were providing and to whom. (This unusual circumstance did not seem to bother their bosses.)

- Agency supervisors monitored the activity but refrained from directing it. The senior leadership deserved a good deal of credit for giving people the responsibility and then supporting them without a lot of handwringing.
- The President-elect, the Vice President-elect, and the National Security Adviser-designate did not, to our knowledge, receive regular, formal briefings from any other part of the government. We appeared to be the only professional US Government officials in continuing contact with these VIPs.
- By Inauguration Day, the daily briefing system was so well established that it seemed natural to all involved that it would simply continue. The question hardly arose; it seemed a fait accompli. At President Reagan's direction, the service

was to be provided also to Secretary of State Haig and Secretary of Defense Weinberger. (George Shultz and William Clark became recipients when they replaced Haig and Allen, respectively.) The Agency had finally obtained the continuing, high-level access it had been seeking since 1961.

- It seems reasonable to assume that the daily cabinet-level briefings that were provided (and welcomed) throughout the Reagan and Bush administrations would not have become such a regular fixture without the precedent of personal briefings during those extraordinary transition months of 1980-81.

As career current intelligence practitioners, we were in the right place at the right time. And we had the best professional products in the business. If we deserve any plaudits for playing our roles well, we are quick to bow to an able supporting cast and to our indulgent customers.

Editor's Note: Co-author Peter Dixon Davis provided former President Bush with a copy of this article, whose response is quoted below in part:

Your article brought back a lot of happy memories and made me realize once again how lucky I was to have the PDB as V.P. and then as President, and how grateful I am and will always be for the work that went into preparing the PDB.

I read it religiously, without fail, and I hope the record will show that we protected the PDB from wide distribution and from careless handling.